

This Is Anarchy

**Eight Ways the Black Lives Matter and Justice for George Floyd Uprisings
Reflect Anarchist Ideas in Action**

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Since Minneapolis police brutally murdered George Floyd on May 25, 2020, demonstrations have exploded across the US and the world. Millions of people have taken to the streets to demand justice for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and an end to police violence and terror, underscoring the need to eradicate systemic racism by radically transforming our society. Within 24 hours of the explosion of protest, the President of the United States claimed that anarchists and anti-fascists were responsible for the unrest that has occurred in cities across the country.

This move to blame anarchists and “antifa” is intended to discredit these popular uprisings while demonizing and isolating the participants. Yet the ways that the prevailing order has failed almost all of us are clearer than ever. Outrage and protest have spread far beyond any particular ideology or group. As tens of thousands fill the streets of scores of cities, it is obvious that anarchists are not responsible for organizing these demonstrations. The demonstrations and the unrest accompanying them represent an organic response to a widely felt need.

At the same time, this organic groundswell of momentum, based in reproducible tactics that anyone can employ, embodies anarchist models for social change. Many of the practices and principles that have been fundamental to this movement have long been mainstays of anarchist organizing.

Here, we explore the anarchist roots of eight principles that have been essential to the success of the Black Lives Matter and Justice for George Floyd demonstrations, seeking to center Black initiatives that reflect anti-authoritarian values. For background on Black anarchism specifically, we recommend Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin’s *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* or the more recent *Anarkata Statement*.

Self-Determination

One of the many things that politicians aim to obscure by insisting that “outside agitators” are responsible for the uprising that began in Minneapolis is that oppressed communities in the United States are *already* occupied and exploited by outsiders. This began with the colonization of North America by European settlers, the original “outside agitators,” and continues today with the ownership of most of the real estate and businesses in Black, indigenous, and immigrant neighborhoods by non-residents with few ties to those communities—not to mention the policing of these neighborhoods by officers like Derek Chauvin who commute to the districts they terrorize.

In opposition to these ongoing occupations, anarchists call for self-determination, arguing that individuals and communities should control their own bodies and living conditions and determine their own destinies rather than live under the imposition of state power, which is designed to serve the urges of a privileged few rather than the needs of the many. As the horrific murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor show, reclaiming control over public space from the police forces that hold Black communities hostage is an essential step towards self-determination.

Likewise, anarchists believe that those who are directly affected by a situation should be the ones to decide how to respond to it. In taking the initiative to respond to the murder of George Floyd themselves on their own terms rather than deferring to “community leaders” or petitioning the government for redress, the people of Minneapolis made their demand for autonomy crystal clear.

On the streets of their neighborhoods, in their schools and workplaces, ordinary people in revolt are finding support from anarchists in their efforts to attain genuine self-determination for their communities.

“We need to use the greatest power that we have, which is control over our bodies, control of our labor, to make the situation ungovernable and untenable in the United States, and to do it in an organized systemic fashion.”

-Kali Akuno of Cooperation Jackson

Decentralization

Contrary to the propaganda of right-wing conspiracy theorists, there has been no single force, organization, or ideology guiding these protests. Demonstrations for justice and against police violence have taken place in all 50 states and nearly 50 other countries over the past week without any central coordination whatsoever.

In contrast to top-down, centralized efforts, this flourishing of grassroots initiatives characterizes the anarchist approach to social change. Like the Occupy Movement, which anarchist activists and tactics helped to launch, local manifestations can take different forms according to context while amplifying the overall message. Horizontal links between participants allow for flexibility, keeping it easy for new people to get involved as they see fit. This model has won historic victories—for example, the mobilization against the summit of the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999, during which anarchists and others outwitted police through a networked structure of autonomous affinity groups that worked together to shut down the city.

Today, Black Lives Matter activists are also employing a decentralized approach, permitting the movement to spread organically and ensuring that it cannot be contained or coopted.

Fighting White Supremacy

As proponents of equality, anarchists oppose white supremacy and fascism. Those on the receiving end of colonial violence have always defended themselves against racist violence; anarchists believe in taking action in solidarity even when they themselves are not the targets. In one of the earliest expressions of anarchism in the United States, the prominent American abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison linked his rejection of the institutions of government and property to his opposition to the institution of slavery. In the 1980s and 1990s, anarchists across North America formed Anti-Racist Action chapters to fight against neo-Nazi organizing. Today’s so-called “antifa” groups are part of this longstanding tradition of defending communities against racist and fascist violence. Historically, anarchist organizing spearheaded by Black people and other people of color has played a critical role in pushing broader social movements to challenge systemic racism. From Ferguson to Charlottesville and in Minneapolis today, anarchists of all ethnicities have been on the front lines of efforts to prevent neo-Nazis, neo-Confederates, and other white supremacists from harming people.

The efforts of President Trump, Attorney General Barr, and the right-wing media to declare “antifa” a terrorist organization are a transparent ploy to undermine this popular uprising and distract its supporters. The Ku Klux Klan, the deadliest terrorist organization in US history, receives

no such condemnation—nor do the groups that radicalized the racist who murdered Heather Heyer in Charlottesville, nor the white supremacist gang whose symbol a NYPD officer flashed last week at a Black Lives Matter protest. Trump’s government brands those who oppose white supremacy and fascism “terrorists,” despite the fact that—unlike the bigots they oppose—they have yet to be responsible for a single person’s death.

Mutual Aid

Mutual aid is a practice of reciprocal care through which participants in a network make sure that everyone’s needs are met. It is neither a tit-for-tat exchange nor the sort of one-way assistance that a charity organization offers, but a free interchange of assistance and resources. Anarchists believe that communities can meet their needs through mutual aid rather than cutthroat competition for profit.

As the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, communities across the US recognized the need to organize to meet urgent needs collectively. Because anarchists took the initiative in these efforts from the beginning, they came to be known under the banner of mutual aid. Subsequently, even progressive politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez called on Americans to form mutual aid initiatives.

The term was originally popularized by the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin and spread through international anarchist networks. Kropotkin, a naturalist and biologist, argued in *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902) that it is reciprocity and cooperation, not bloodthirsty competition, that enables species from the smallest microorganisms to human societies to survive and thrive. This challenged the Social Darwinist dogma of “survival of the fittest” that business elites used to justify the exploitation and inequality that accompanied the expansion of global capitalism in the nineteenth century. Kropotkin made a scientific and philosophical case for reorganizing society according to the principles of mutual aid, which he described as “the close dependency of every one’s happiness upon the happiness of all” and “the sense of justice, or equity, which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own.” Since Kropotkin’s day, anarchists have consistently put this principle into practice via efforts like Food Not Bombs, Really Really Free Markets, community bail and bond funds, the Common Ground Collective’s work after Hurricane Katrina, Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, and other projects.

Today, COVID-19 relief volunteers and supporters of the Justice for George Floyd protests collaborate to offer free medical care, water, food, and supplies on the streets of Minneapolis, Washington, DC, and around the United States. These efforts draw on the anarchist principle *to each according to need, from each according to ability*.

It’s no surprise that COVID-19 relief and protest support efforts are intersecting. Due to the racialized disparities in wealth, health care access, and workplace vulnerability, people of color and Black people in particular have suffered disproportionately during the pandemic. Fighting for the principle that Black lives matter means confronting not only police violence but also all the other systems of oppression that have kept so many Black communities impoverished. These community initiatives reflect the anarchist idea that everyone’s health and freedom are interlinked and can best be preserved through solidarity.

Social Movement Infrastructure

As hundreds of thousands of people have poured into the streets, defying police orders and curfews, over 10,000 protestors have been arrested and many injured by police or right-wing vigilantes. Despite this, the movement has continued to grow, thanks in part to emerging social movement infrastructure including collectives providing health and medical support, pro-bono legal assistance, bail funds, and other forms of solidarity. Anarchists have participated on the front lines of these efforts, leveraging longstanding infrastructure and drawing on decades of experience.

Participating in the worldwide protest network journalists dubbed the “anti-globalization” movement in the 1990s, anarchists took an active role in organizing collective infrastructure for medical, legal, and logistical support at large protests. Bail funds, activist lawyers, street medics, and communication teams played a critical role in mobilizations like the one against the World Trade Organization summit in Seattle. Since then, anarchists have honed their skills in mass mobilizations against government and corporate gatherings from the Republican and Democratic National Conventions from 2000 onwards to the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh in 2009 and Donald Trump’s inauguration in 2017. Organizing horizontally in volunteer networks, building relationships between local and national organizers, and drawing on solidarity and mutual aid to provide resources to participants, they have repeatedly empowered ordinary people to exert an outsize influence on historic events.

We see the legacy of these successes in the emerging legal and medical infrastructures supporting the Justice for George Floyd protests. For example, the Northstar Health Collective in Minneapolis, which provided critical support for the protests, was founded by anarchists during the mobilization against the 2008 Republican National Convention.

Diversity of Tactics

In a decentralized movement, how can various groups employing different strategies coordinate to minimize the likelihood of conflict? How can they ensure that their efforts are not vulnerable to the divide-and-conquer strategies of the state and conservative media interests? For decades, anarchists have experimented with answers to these questions.

When the Republican National Convention took place in Minnesota in 2008, a coalition of protest groups involving many anarchists agreed upon the “St. Paul Principles,” inspired by similar points of unity used in mass organizing efforts anchored by anarchists in major cities in Canada and the US over the preceding years. Models like this assist people of diverse ideologies and priorities in supporting rather than hindering each other’s efforts.

The Justice for George Floyd protests are so diverse and incorporate so many different approaches that by no means all participants adhere to this framework. But many of the most prominent voices are insisting on a similar approach to prevent the movement from being divided. This embrace of a diversity of tactics reflects the core anarchist value of autonomy.

Systemic Change

Anarchists reject focusing on petitioning for top-down reforms in favor of seeking solutions that attack social problems at their roots. Reforms can be a step towards fundamental change, but anarchists argue that we should begin from an analysis of the root causes of social ills and a holistic understanding of the systems that both ensure disparities and benefit from them.

So far, none of the reforms that politicians propose, such as civilian review boards or body cameras, have served to diminish police violence on a nationwide level. Neither have legal responses, such as bringing lawsuits or charges against officers, nor electoral solutions like lobbying or voting in new politicians. Despite reform efforts following the rebellion in Ferguson in 2014, the number of police killings annually in the US actually increased between 2015 and 2019.

Today, for the first time, mainstream discourse is acknowledging the possibility of defunding police departments or abolishing them altogether. Anarchists join Black feminists and prison abolitionists in insisting that cosmetic reforms will not solve the underlying issues of power, racism, and exploitation that drive state violence. Anarchists have been targets of police and state violence for over a century, from the Haymarket martyrs to the Anarchist Exclusion Act, the Palmer Raids, and the J20 case. These experiences inform the anarchist vision of a world entirely free of police and the exploitation they perpetuate.

“The unjust institutions which work so much misery and suffering to the masses have their root in governments, and owe their whole existence to the power derived from government, we cannot help but believe that were every law, every title deed, every court, and *every police officer or soldier abolished tomorrow* with one sweep, we would be better off than now.”

-Lucy Parsons, The Principles of Anarchism

People over Profit and Property

The slogan “Black Lives Matter” has radical implications. To assert that human life is more important than preserving state control or protecting corporate property poses a profound challenge to today’s political and economic order. This implies a fundamentally different ethics than the logic of the state.

As the COVID-19 crisis has shown, business as usual can be deadly. Alongside environmental destruction, workplace accidents, massive consumer debt, and the waste of human potential that characterizes the capitalist economy, the pandemic is adding another layer of tragedy to the costs of valuing profit over people. Many workers, forced to return to their jobs by politically motivated reopening efforts, are being punished by their employers for attempting to protect their health. All of this, on top of the pervasive police violence that sparked the Floyd protests, suggests how little the powerful value the lives of everyday people.

Anarchists join the Black Lives Matter movement in promoting a different conception of value. Insisting on the value of Black lives means challenging the institutions that prioritize profit and control over them—the police as well as the politicians protecting them, exploitative employers, polluters, profiteers, and many others. This means taking a stand against capitalism as well as police. From the Industrial Workers of the World, a union that challenges the wage system itself,

to the mutual aid networks that put gift economies into practice, anarchists consistently strive to foster a world of cooperation beyond the market. The Movement for Black Lives, too, outlines that they are explicitly anti-capitalist in their organizing principles. Valuing Black lives requires profoundly transforming the economic system.

Many voices both inside and out of the protests are joining the chorus demanding that human life must take precedence over property. Even business owners who have experienced looting or fires in the course of the protests have spoken up to insist that the focus should remain on the core issues of anti-Black violence, policing, and social justice. This points the way toward an ethics of solidarity that characterizes anarchist approaches to social transformation.

What Will It Take to Get Free?

President Trump is wrong. It's not "anarchists" who are responsible for the courageous militant actions we've seen in the streets—though anarchists of many ethnicities have participated. Above all, it has been Black and brown youth and other marginalized people whose bravery and determination have compelled the entire world to take notice. As we've seen, there are significant overlaps between the values and strategies of anarchist movements and of Black Lives Matter and other anti-police and liberation struggles. While anarchists should not displace other participants' ways of describing their activities to claim these as examples of anarchist ideology, these resonances are the basis for mutual exchange and solidarity in the process of building multi-racial movements for liberation.

Anarchists believe that it is worth fighting to create a society based on mutual aid, autonomy, equality, freedom, and solidarity. For any movement to be effective, the participants must identify what it will take to change things. The courageous response to the murder of George Floyd showed the effectiveness of uncompromising direct action—not only to raise the social costs of injustice, but also to make it possible to imagine another world. After the burning of the third precinct in Minneapolis demonstrated that ordinary people can defeat the police in open conflict, defunding and abolishing the police became thinkable on the scale of nationwide public discourse.

In Minneapolis and then in Louisville, Los Angeles, New York City, and around the world, Black, brown, and other marginalized people have converged to shut down business as usual. Anarchists have participated, contributing experience with resistance tactics, infrastructures that offer support to all in need, and visions of a world in which the institutions that killed George Floyd and so many others would not exist. Ideas and approaches that resonate with anarchist values can be seen in action throughout these protests, regardless of whether those who employ them give them political labels.

These values and practices, which transcend any single ideology or tradition, can be the basis for people to come together across lines of difference as they confront state power in the streets. The indigenous anarchist collective Indigenous Action and others have argued that modern movements need "accomplices not allies"—people dedicated to sharing risks and taking direct action together, motivated by a vision of collective liberation rather than guilt, duty, or prestige. The Justice for George Floyd protests have demonstrated the effectiveness of multiracial, decentralized, grassroots efforts. Informed by a horizontal, participatory ethos that rejects police violence

as well as every other form of state coercion, anarchists insist that everyone has a role to play in the process of getting free.

One of the most central messages from anarchist organizing over the past decades—including struggles for refugee and migrant solidarity, queer liberation, prison abolition and beyond—is that each of us can only be free when all of us are free. Ashanti Alston, an anarchist activist, speaker, and writer, has articulated this beautifully. As a former member of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army and a former political prisoner, Alston has had plenty of experience confronting state violence. Informed by the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, his vision of collective liberation reflects an anarchist ethos shared across many movements and communities, echoing forward to inspire our efforts today:

“We have to figure out how to create a world where it’s possible for all different people to be who they are, to have a world where everyone fits.”

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